

Open Letter to Students at the University of Manitoba

The University of Manitoba Faculty Association has been negotiating with the administration since mid-June. The issues that remain on the table are the ones that will determine the culture and the mission of this university far into the future.

Although University of Manitoba academics, at virtually all ranks, are at the bottom of any list of average salaries for comparable universities in Canada, money is not the big issue. We believe that salaries could be negotiated. Despite what the administration has said publicly, it knows that money is not the key factor preventing an agreement.

However, we are at a serious impasse on several matters: academic freedom; privacy of email and other correspondence; whether the administration can use evaluative measures to restrict the kind of research that will be valued here; and whether collegial governance principles will be respected when setting promotion and tenure criteria and weightings. There has been a steady erosion of collegial governance over the last few years and a decreasing respect for the opinions, views, and beliefs of the academic community here at the University of Manitoba. We are fighting that trend.

Academic freedom is one of the pillars of a good university. UMFA Members want to have the Collective Agreement clearly state that we have the right to criticize the university administration, and that we have the right to contribute to social change through the free expression of opinion on all matters of public interest without fear of reprisal or repression by the university administration. The administration refuses to put these changes into the Collective Agreement.

The administration has said that it is not attempting to reduce rights under the UMFA Collective Agreement. But the truth is that this administration is taking new initiatives outside the collective bargaining process that undermine academic freedom. It has proposed what it calls “performance management systems” that would control what research a professor could do, where that research could be published, and how it could be funded. Researchers would have to meet targets set by administrators, instead of having the academic freedom to choose research projects according to their best professional judgment.

These restrictions on research essentially undermine the idea of the university. A good university has scholars who are immersed in, and passionate about, their subject areas. They strive to expand their fields, not to narrow them into easily “manageable” categories. Protecting academic freedom is essential to maintaining a high quality of education for students.

The administration is also amalgamating and discontinuing faculties in ways that undermine fundamental principles of collegial governance. While the administration asks for the opinions of academics and students, it is clear that it does not take these views into consideration and is not going to change the direction that it has set. We can't bargain for students, but we must bargain for our Members' rights to have a real influence on the administration's decisions and for our rights to be respected when these changes do go forward.

The administration is using its vast public relations resources, including its student listserv, to send you, the students, its perspective on the current state of negotiations. We will do our best to provide you with information from our perspective. We are proposing a mediation process to the university in the hopes of reaching an agreement at the table.

We hope that we can reach a settlement and avoid a strike. But if a satisfactory settlement cannot be reached, a strike will begin on the morning of Tuesday, October 22.

If there is a strike, we hope you will support and respect UMFA's picket lines. The Manitoba Human Rights Code covers the University of Manitoba and prevents discrimination against students on political grounds. Therefore, students who refuse to cross picket lines must be accommodated and cannot be subject to academic penalty or disadvantage. If there is a strike, picket lines will be up from 7 am to 5 pm at all Fort Garry campus entrances, with one on the Bannatyne Campus as well.

Please check our website www.umfa.ca for updated information on the state of negotiations and on issues related to these negotiations.

Sharon Alward, President
University of Manitoba Faculty Association